

**PREACHING A FAITH NOT OUR OWN:**

**Torrance and the Vicarious Faith of Christ**

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**Abstract:** *Evangelicals often find themselves doubting the sincerity of their personal decision for Christ, resulting in an existential fear of rejection by God. By examining Torrance's writing on conversion and faith, this paper argues that such doubt arises from a dualistic, deistic understanding of faith that fails to consider the vicarious humanity of Christ. Such salvific anxiety and doubt are resolved if personal faith is instead viewed as ontologically rooted in Christ's vicarious faith offered to the Father as humanity's substitute and representative. Since many Evangelical traditions include a time for response after the preaching event, homiletical guidance for offering a clear invitation for conversion that includes this nuanced understanding of faith is presented.*

## 1. Introduction

Homileticians have long argued that preaching should aim for a response from its listeners. Though calls for a decision are appropriate to the homiletical event, an overemphasis on encouraging listeners to place their faith in Christ has resulted in an inability for listeners to have assurance of their salvation, being that it was conditioned on their response to the gospel. Thomas F. Torrance has identified this trend and stated, "There is a kind of subtle Pelagianism in preaching and teaching which has the effect of throwing people back in the last resort on their own act of faith, so that in the last analysis responsibility for their salvation rests upon themselves, rather than on Christ."<sup>1</sup> As a solution to this "subtle Pelagianism," Torrance proposes the vicarious humanity of Christ, which shifts one's focus from one's subjective faith in Christ to faith's object: the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ. It is his faith, not the believer's, that saves. Therefore, this paper will argue that preaching the vicarious humanity of Christ — and his vicarious faith by extension — shifts the burden of salvation from the shoulders of humanity to those of Jesus, providing a greater sense of assurance for the believer.

I will begin by briefly reviewing how the church dealt with a dualistic understanding of faith at Nicaea and the Reformation. Torrance hopes to retrieve the unitary thinking that occurred during these two periods as he applies the vicarious humanity of Christ to today's current misunderstanding about the nature of faith. A brief doctrinal analysis of Christ's vicarious humanity will then be offered before considering how Evangelicalism has sought to address issues of faith and assurance today, with particular focus given to J. D. Greear's *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart* as an interlocutor that seeks to offer a solution at a popular level.<sup>2</sup> The final section of this essay considers how preaching can articulate the vicarious

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 35.

<sup>2</sup> J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2013). Greear is the pastor of Summit Church, a multisite congregation with more than 10,000 weekly attendants. The breadth of his ministry, coupled with the popularity of his book among American Evangelicals, made him a helpful interlocutor for the common perception of faith at a popular Evangelical level.

humanity of Christ so that misconceptions surrounding faith are mitigated or ameliorated, particularly in preaching's call for a response from listeners.

## 2. Dualism, Deism, and Faith

Understanding how the church has combatted dualistic thought — that being the bifurcation of spirit and matter, God and the world — in the past can teach contemporary preachers how to deal with the faith crisis of the present. Torrance sees the church combatting dualistic thought during three historical periods: the early church, the Reformation, and today. In his eyes, there are epistemological similarities between the current intellectual climate and that of the fourth century. The unification of the being and act of God in the person of the Son was “the supreme truth” that the early church established in clarifying the doctrine of the *homoousion*.<sup>3</sup> The *homoousion* worked against the cultural climate, which “worked with a radical dualism between the sensible world and the intelligible world, or between appearance and reality.”<sup>4</sup> In the doctrine of the *homoousion*, Spirit and matter, Creator and creation, were brought into a unification that confounded the expectations of many of that time, as evident in the numerous heresies that arose in resistance to the doctrine. Torrance writes the following:

By giving conceptual expression to oneness between the Son of God become man in our world of space and time and God the Creator of heaven and earth and of all visible and invisible reality, the early church set aside at a stroke the epistemological dualism of Greek thought and did something that penetrated into and changed the very foundations of knowledge in the ancient world.<sup>5</sup>

Torrance sees a similar effect achieved at the Reformation through reconsidering the notion of grace in light of the Nicene Creed's affirmation of the Holy Spirit as the Lord and Giver of life, where the Giver and the Gift are the same. In the pre-Reformation period, a conception of grace had arisen whereby it was thought of “as

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<sup>3</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

something detached from God, but if the Nicene principle that the gift and the Giver are one applies to grace, then it is impossible to think of grace or of the Spirit as endowments bequeathed by Christ to the church to be administered under the authority of the church.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, the gift of grace by Christ the giver are one and the same: “properly understood grace is Christ, so that to be saved by grace alone is to be saved by Christ alone.”<sup>7</sup>

Torrance noted that the church has had to continually struggle against a theological tendency to bifurcate the being and act of God, which is all the more prevalent in today’s deistic society that has seen a massive upsurge in “relativism, secularism, and syncretism.”<sup>8</sup> His solution? Preach Christ in accordance with his singularity in being with God. Furthermore, he sees a focus upon the vicarious humanity of Christ as the current need of the hour.<sup>9</sup> For it is through the vicarious humanity of Christ that the deistic framework of modern thought can be overcome as it forces people to come to grips with a God who is ontologically connected to themselves and not distant or on the other side of some sort of conceptual chasm.

### **3. The Vicarious Humanity of Christ**

#### **The Hypostatic Union**

In order to address the crisis of faith facing the church today, Torrance encouraged consideration of Christ’s faith, but his faith must be approached upon acknowledging his ontological union with humanity. The starting point of Christology, however, is neither the fact that God became man (a Christology from above), nor an examination of his life and its testimony as credence to his divine status (a Christology from below). It is to take both of these realities at once. Torrance asserts,

he is God, and very God, and yet man and very man: God and man become one person. We know Christ in the mystery of that duality.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 30.

That is the starting point for a true Christology — and that is precisely where the witness of the New Testament faces us, face to face with Christ in his wholeness as God and man.<sup>10</sup>

It is the hypostatic union where Torrance sees the beginning of Christology, not a dualistic pattern of thought that seeks to first consider his deity in absence from his humanity or his humanity in absence from his divinity. Consideration must therefore simultaneously be given to the double movement of God to man and man to God that make up the one life of Christ.

### **God to Humanity**

The incarnation is just as much a part of the atonement as the cross, for it is here that God plunged into the depths of human depravity in order to redeem not only his sinful flesh but the mind as well. Thus, Torrance argued for the church to affirm that at the incarnation Christ assumed a fallen human nature.<sup>11</sup> Gregory of Nazianzen declared, “The unassumed is the unhealed,” and so it was necessary for Christ to not only take on the likeness of sinful flesh but to redeem the cognitive fallenness of the human mind as well.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Torrance asks:

If the Word of God did not really come into our fallen existence, if the Son of God did not actually come where we are, and join himself to us and range himself with us where we are in sin and under judgment, how could it be said that Christ really took our place, took our cause upon himself in order to redeem us?<sup>13</sup>

Because the assumption of fallen human flesh was an ontological union, it was a sanctifying, restorative, and redemptive event.<sup>14</sup> “Thus, his taking of our flesh of sin

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 61–64, 201, 231–32.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, “Letter 101,” in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel R. Wickham, Popular Patristic Series 23 (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 158.

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

was a sinless action, which means that Jesus does not do in his humanity what we do, namely, sin, but it also means that by remaining holy and sinless in our flesh, he condemned sin in the flesh he assumed and judged it by his very sinlessness.”<sup>15</sup> If Christ’s human nature was merely neutral, like that of a pre-fallen Adam, then would not the life he lived be one only of moral example, demonstrating that God’s love stopped short of identifying with men and women as they really are in their estrangement from God?<sup>16</sup> Here, the doctrine of the an/enhypostasia can keep one from misunderstanding what Torrance seeks to accomplish in articulating that Christ assumed fallen human flesh. Van Kuiken offers a brief description of Christ’s assumed flesh:

Considered in itself, apart from him as Son or Word, it is *anyhypostatic*, having no personhood of its own. In the Incarnation, the Son assumes a human nature, not a human person. But considered in its union with the Son, his human nature is *enhyposstatic*: it participates in his Personhood, being personalized in him even as the Person of the Son is humanized in it (though without diluting his divinity).<sup>17</sup>

Van Kuiken sees the distinction between *an/enhypostasia* as clarifying for Christ’s atoning work at the incarnation as well. “Whenever Torrance speaks of the human nature assumed by Christ as sinful, depraved, and the like, he is viewing it anhypostatically — that is, apart from its sanctifying union with the Person of Christ. Whenever Torrance speaks of Christ’s humanity as sinless, pure, and holy, that humanity is being considered enhypostatically.”<sup>18</sup> This distinction is key because it demonstrates that atonement was not relegated only to the cross but

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Jerome Van Kuiken, “‘Not I, but Christ:’ Thomas F. Torrance on the Christian Life,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, ed. Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 246.

<sup>17</sup> Van Kuiken, “Thomas F. Torrance on the Christian Life,” 244; For a fuller description of the *an/en-hypostasis* in Torrance’s thought see Robert T. Walker, “The Innovative Fruitfulness of *An/En-Hypostasis* in Thomas F. Torrance,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, ed. Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 189–206.

<sup>18</sup> Van Kuiken, “Thomas F. Torrance on the Christian Life,” 246.

began at Christ's very conception. Christ redeemed humanity's fallen nature and then lived that life before God as a man on behalf of all people.

### **Humanity to God**

Jesus Christ is the response of humanity to God; the true servant of the Lord, who hears his voice and obeys his commands. Thus, Jesus Christ is the mediator of both revelation and reconciliation, embodying both acts.<sup>19</sup> Christ is not only the Word of God to humanity, who makes himself known in his own act of self-communication, but he is also the one who receives that Word and responds to it in humble obedience through his own humanity.<sup>20</sup> He is both spoken Word and listening ear, who in turn offers his own response back to God as man on behalf of man.<sup>21</sup> It is not just the incarnation or the crucifixion that is necessary for atonement, in Torrance's view, but every aspect of Christ's being and act from cradle to grave.<sup>22</sup> In his humanity, Christ offers the needed response of humanity to God through his faithful obedience and trust. Elmer Colyer writes, "Jesus Christ, in his vicarious humanity, *is* God's act of incarnational atonement and therefore the very heart of the gospel."<sup>23</sup> Thus, there are two key aspects to Christ's vicarious atoning work: substitution and representation.

Substitution and representation are in no way bifurcated within Torrance's doctrine of Christ's vicarious humanity. Torrance writes:

It will not do to think of what Christ has done for us only in terms of representation, for that would imply that Jesus represents, or stands for, *our* response, that he is the leader of humanity in humanity's act of response to God. On the other hand, if Jesus is a substitute in

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, Revised edition (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 23.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 145.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T.F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian & Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 111; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, Second edition, T&T Clark Cornerstones (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 4, 8, 145–154.

detachment from us, who simply acts in our stead in an external, formal or forensic way, then his response has no ontological bearing upon us but is an empty transaction over our heads.<sup>24</sup>

Torrance coins this lack of an ontological link the “Latin heresy,” which considers the atonement in “juridical terms as a transaction between Christ and the rest of humanity.”<sup>25</sup> His frustration is that “in Western Christianity the atonement tends to be interpreted almost exclusively in terms of external forensic relations as a juridical transaction in the transference of penalty for sin from the sinner to the sinner-bearer.”<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that Torrance denies the key components that make up Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA),<sup>27</sup> only that he feels that this is frequently communicated in a way that doesn’t go far enough. Woznicki points out that Torrance’s ire arises from the feeling that PSA is communicated as something external and transactional over and above humanity.<sup>28</sup> “Torrance’s version of penal and substitutionary atonement has Christ stand as a substitute for humanity not because of a merely legal relation with humanity but because of an ontological bond with every human being.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Torrance longs for both representation and substitution to be attributed to Christ in an overlapping and integrated way.<sup>30</sup>

### **Humanity’s Response to Christ**

For Christ’s faith and vicarious humanity to be applied to humans is for humans to make Christ’s life, death, and resurrection their own. Thus, Galatians 2:20 was of paramount importance for Torrance, and he was adamant that it should

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<sup>24</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Woznicki, “Torrance and Atonement,” in *Thomas F. Torrance and Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis*, ed. Myk Habets and R. Lucas Stamps, *Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology* (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2023), 184.

<sup>26</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> To see where Torrance affirms PSA see, Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 68–69, 154.

<sup>28</sup> For a description of Torrance’s critique and affirmation of PSA see Woznicki, “Torrance and Atonement,” 199–203.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>30</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 80–81; Colyer, *How to Read T.F. Torrance*, 112.



be understood as a subjective genitive, preferring the KJV's translation: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Torrance comments, "'The faith of the Son of God' is to be understood here not just as my faith in him, but as the faith of Christ himself, for it refers primarily to Christ's unswerving faithfulness, his vicarious and substitutionary faith which embraces and undergirds us, such that when we believe we must say with St. Paul 'not I but Christ' even in our act of faith."<sup>31</sup> Christian Kettler writes, "His faith is that which picks up our faltering, imperfect faith and believes in our place. This does not denigrate our faith, because it is only through his faith that we can believe."<sup>32</sup> Torrance rests this view of Christ's vicarious faith on the *katallage* (substitution) of Christ. He finds it ironic that evangelicals focus only on the cross in their view of Christ's substitution, when affirming its extension to his entire life would be "dynamite" for them.<sup>33</sup> Still, Torrance has been criticized for not having a place for man's response to Christ,<sup>34</sup> but this critique neglects the individual, personal actualizing that takes place in Christ's representative humanity:

He [Christ] is the personalizing Person, and we are personalized persons. Thus, far from depersonalizing human being, or overriding the human person, the coming of Jesus Christ has the effect of personalizing human being in a profounder way than ever before.<sup>35</sup>

Reconsideration of the isolationist conception of personhood is needed at this point. Marty Folsom has argued that the common conception of "person" is as an individual who has relationships with others like that of a billiard ball bumping up against another. Instead, he feels "person" should be considered as onto-relations

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<sup>31</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 31; Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Christian D. Kettler, "'Jesus Christ Is Our Human Response to God: Divine and Human Agency in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance,'" in *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, ed. Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 212.

<sup>33</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> John Webster, "T.F. Torrance, 1915–2007," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 4 (2008): 371.

<sup>35</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 68.

whereby, personhood is impossible to conceive of outside of the relationships that one has with others, forming a web of mutually dependent interactions rather than the bumping together of individualized billiard balls.<sup>36</sup> When it comes to one's relationship with God, then, comes the opportunity of relating with one who exists in triune relationship and from whom all personhood is defined: "The relationship develops through what Torrance calls 'indwelling,'<sup>37</sup> referring to 'participating in the active life of Jesus,' by the Spirit who is at work in us. Our part includes a 'responsive, dynamic indwelling'<sup>38</sup> within God's life."<sup>39</sup> As "person" is understood within this framework of onto-relations, capturing the idea of being-in-relation, the human response to Christ within the framework of initiating a personal relationship with Christ moves from transactional to relational. Folsom writes the following:

This transfer moves from 'my performance' to 'our relationship,' opening the way for authentic personal relating with Jesus, who is God and human. He mediates our relation, bringing the life of God to us and bringing us into the embrace of God's life of love.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, if God is the personalizing Person and humans are personalized persons, Christ's mediatorial work warrants further consideration:

In Jesus Christ we have embodied in our humanity personalizing Person and personalized person in one and the same being, in whom the personalized person is brought to its fullest reality. Thus far from being emptied or overpowered by the divine Person, the human person

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<sup>36</sup> Marty Folsom, "Barth, Torrance, and Evangelicals: Critiquing and Reinvigorating the Idea of a 'Personal Relationship with Jesus,'" in *Thomas F. Torrance and Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis*, ed. Myk Habets and R. Lucas Stamps, Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2023), 170.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, The Torrance Collection Theologos (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 49.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality & Evangelical Theology: The Realism of Christian Revelation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 48.

<sup>39</sup> Folsom, "Barth, Torrance, and Evangelicals," 175.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

is reinforced and upheld in its indissoluble oneness with the divine.<sup>41</sup>

Rather than displacing mankind's response to God, Christ's vicarious faith grounds and actualizes mankind's faith as they are brought into relationship with the one who is both the personalizing Person in his divinity and the true, holy personalized person in his humanity.

The faith between Christ and the believer consists in a polar relationship. Torrance describes this polarity whereby, "the primary pole is certainly God's faith or Christ's faith ... but within the embrace of that relation the secondary pole is that of the believer, his responding faith."<sup>42</sup> To illustrate, Torrance speaks of teaching his daughter to walk. As they walked along, it was clear that she was not upheld by her feeble grasp of her father's hand but his firm clutch of her own. <sup>43</sup> "In other words," Geordie Ziegler writes, "our pole is not of ourselves but is a gift of God. The primary pole of the Christian life lies outside of ourselves. The primary pole is the humanity of the risen Christ."<sup>44</sup> Yet, the human pole still requires activity on the part of the individual, and Torrance affirms that there is still expectation that one responds to God's grace through confessing with their mouth that Jesus is Lord.<sup>45</sup>

#### **4. The Evangelical Faith Crisis**

Failure to allow Christ's faith to provide the anchor for our own assurance of salvation has resulted in a sense of anxiety among contemporary Evangelicals. Folsom writes, "Today, evangelical Christians see themselves as individuals who once did not have a relationship with God but decided to follow Jesus. Subtly, this focuses the relationship on the human decision."<sup>46</sup> Torrance calls this understanding

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<sup>41</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 68.

<sup>42</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 31–32.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Geordie Ziegler, "Thinking and Acting in Christ: Torrance on Spiritual Formation," in *Thomas F. Torrance and Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis*, ed. Myk Habets and R. Lucas Stamps, *Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology* (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2023), 255–56.

<sup>45</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 156.

<sup>46</sup> Folsom, "Barth, Torrance, and Evangelicals," 165.

“a kind of subtle Pelagianism” since it leads people to rely on their own act of faith rather than Christ. He writes, “in far too much preaching of Christ the ultimate responsibility is taken off the shoulders of the Lamb of God and put upon the shoulders of the poor sinner, and he knows well in his heart that he cannot cope with it.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Whose Shoulders Bear the Weight?**

This inability to cope with the burden of salvation is well illustrated in the popular work *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved*, by J. D. Greear. Greear begins by noting how his own lack of assurance led to him being baptized four times.<sup>48</sup> Each baptism originated from an anxiety that he was not truly sincere in his previous decision to follow Christ. Many in Evangelicalism can identify with Greear’s concern for the authenticity of one’s salvation, especially in the face of passages like Matthew 7:21–23 that describe Christ turning away those who thought they were believers.<sup>49</sup> However, it’s important to consider his proposed solution to this salvific anxiety.

Greear begins well by highlighting how at his church they summarize the gospel in four words: “Jesus in my place.”<sup>50</sup> He writes, “Jesus took our sin, suffering the full weight of its penalty. In return He offers to us His righteousness. When we are united to Christ, what is ours becomes His and what is His becomes ours.”<sup>51</sup> Greear is driving home the substitutionary aspect of the gospel, but it’s important to see how he frames the concept of *faith* because it captures the common evangelical view of the concept.

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<sup>47</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 35.

<sup>48</sup> Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> According to a Barna study in 2017, 65% of evangelicals have experienced some form of doubt about their faith in God. Though 53% say that their faith became stronger, 7% say doubt weakened their faith and 12% confessed to losing their faith altogether. “Two-Thirds of Christians Face Doubt,” Barna Group, July 25, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/two-thirds-christians-face-doubt/>.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Greear argues that faith is “belief in action” and the object of faith is to be entirely in Christ Jesus.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, he sees as problematic the approach to salvation as that of a ceremony where one says the right words — maybe the sinner’s prayer — and “gets saved.” If the ceremony is what brings assurance, then memory failure or lack of sincerity could bring into question the previous act of “asking Jesus into one’s heart.”<sup>53</sup> Greear sees a better way forward through encouraging believers to consider their heart’s current posture: “If you are right now resting in His arms, knowing when you began to rest is less important than that you are doing it now. Your present posture is more important than past memory.”<sup>54</sup> Here, the assurance of salvation is placed upon the shoulders of the individual, but Greear knows that only Christ brings about salvation and so he still seeks to assign the burden of salvation to Christ while still leaving place for man’s responsibility. Therefore, he will assert on the one hand that “Salvation is a posture of repentance and faith toward the finished work of Christ in which you transfer the weight of your hopes of heaven off of your own righteousness and onto the finished work of Christ.”<sup>55</sup> But on the other hand he states, “The way to know you made the decision is by the fact that you are resting in Christ now ... The posture begins at a moment, but it persists for a lifetime.”<sup>56</sup> Greear then asserts that when he doubts his own salvation he asks where his faith is currently located, if it is presently on Jesus then there is no need to look back further at the time when one made a decision.<sup>57</sup> The question, then, is whether one’s current faith posture is a sufficient litmus test for one’s eternal security?

Philip Cary, a Lutheran, says “no” in a review he wrote of Greear’s work.<sup>58</sup> Cary acknowledges that Greear is appropriately reacting against the popular notion

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 41–42.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>58</sup> Phillip Cary, “Review of *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart*,” *Christianity Today* 57.2 (2013): 53–55.

of “once saved, always saved” that posits that one can make a decision for Christ and then live their life however they see fit. Cary places Greear in the Calvinistic tradition that says that a persevering faith will endure until the end, which means that believers will not point back to a decision but to their active abiding in Christ.

This is helpful, but of course it does not solve every problem. It's always possible to worry whether your current posture really is one of faith and repentance — those two inseparable biblical requirements that Greear aptly summarizes as belief in the gospel and surrendering to the lordship of Christ. What if you have not repented and do not truly believe?”<sup>59</sup>

In other words, doubt can still creep into one's own current heart posture so long as the focus is on the self. Cary encourages readers to ask the following questions:

How do I know that my current posture is going to last? I am sitting now, but is there any decision I now make that will guarantee I keep sitting? I am resting the weight of my soul on Jesus now, but how can I be sure that I will keep doing this until the end of my life?<sup>60</sup>

These questions point out the anxiety that can still remain for believers who follow Greear's method. Cary states that his own faith tradition of Lutheranism makes no such claim. Instead, true faith is revealed at the end as that which persevered, the current task of the believer is then to keep their eyes on Jesus and not their own faith. Calvinism, then, offers assurance of one's salvation, while Lutheranism makes no such offer but instead frees one from the burden of considering one's own faith. There is a cost with either tradition:

What you get, for that price, is the freedom for faith to continue to “look outside itself” at Christ alone and not “back onto itself,” not even for the sake of telling the difference between temporary and saving faith. What you lose is eternal security, the assurance that you are already saved for eternity. Every tradition has its distinctive anxieties,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

the price it pays for its distinctive convictions. For my part, I go all the way with Luther, for I think Christian faith puts faith in Christ alone — and not even a little bit in itself. And I think we should pay any price for such faith.<sup>61</sup>

Cary has offered an either-or distinction in his portrayal of assurance. Either one can have it but be plagued by doubt of their faith's genuineness or not have it and keep their eyes on Christ. Torrance's doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ, however, seems to pave a *via media* through these two extremes. It provides assurance by consoling anxious sinners that their weak and faltering faith is united to Christ's enduring, salvific faith, while at the same time addressing Cary's concern of making Christ the primary Object of one's faith as the believer's faith is polarized with Christ's, resulting in an onto-relationship of objective assurance.

Greear himself has a place for Christ's vicarious faith and repentance when considering Jesus's baptism. For those who worry whether or not their repentance was good enough, Greear points to Christ's baptism as a vicarious baptism of repentance for those who trust in him. Greear writes the following that seems very similar to Torrance's doctrine of Christ's vicarious humanity:

He [Jesus] was undergoing a baptism of repentance in my place, repenting in a way that could truly be called 'righteous,' so that his death could be a perfect substitute for mine. He lived the life I should have lived. All of it, He did everything perfectly in my place. So the good news for me is that I don't have to repent *perfectly*, because He did so for me.<sup>62</sup>

With Greear, Torrance sees Christ's baptism as a vicarious act of repentance because even the repentance with which humanity repents is tainted by sin, and so a perfect repentance was required.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, the fear of one's faltering faith is removed. "Since a conversion in that truly evangelical sense is a turning away from ourselves to Christ, it calls for a conversion from our in-turned notions of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>62</sup> Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart*, 72.

<sup>63</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 85.

conversion to one which is grounded and sustained in Christ Jesus himself."<sup>64</sup> There is no need to worry about the sincerity of one's personal decision when it is Christ's repentance that is credited to humanity through representation and substitution. How, then, should this view of repentance impact preaching?

## 5. Torrance and Evangelism

Failure to accurately preach the Gospel will corrupt its message of good news for the sinner:

The Gospel is to be proclaimed in such a way that full place is given to the man Jesus in his Person and Work as the Mediator between God and man, otherwise it is not being proclaimed in a way that corresponds with its actual message of unconditional grace and reconciling exchange.<sup>65</sup>

Preaching with this focus is not easy, for it must be done in a way "that we do not throw people back upon themselves in autonomous acts of personal repentance and decision, or encourage them to come to Christ for their own sake rather than for Christ's sake."<sup>66</sup> To preach in this way would be *unevangelistic*. Unevangelical preaching occurs when preachers state that believers will not be saved unless they put their trust in Christ or give their heart to him. Colyer writes, "The gospel has to be proclaimed in a way that does not make Christ's redeeming activity on our behalf dependent on *our* activity of repentance, decision, and faith."<sup>67</sup> The difference between evangelical and unevangelical preaching is located in effectively how one communicates grace. In unevangelical preaching "what is actually coming across to people is not a Gospel of unconditional grace but some other Gospel of conditional grace which belies the essential nature and content of the Gospel as it is in Jesus."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>67</sup> Colyer, *How to Read T.F. Torrance*, 116.

<sup>68</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 93.



Torrance sees the solution to unevangelistic preaching in preaching the vicarious humanity of Christ, for it is here that unconditional grace can be offered.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the only response is one of reception and thanksgiving.<sup>70</sup> Yet, Colyer notes that Torrance's understanding of unconditional grace can be difficult for Evangelicals, thinking that there is no longer a place for human agency. He argues that one must move away from understanding divine and human agency in a *logical* way.<sup>71</sup> Torrance sees the inter-working of these two things as "a miracle of the Spirit, and is ultimately as inexplicable as the miracle of the Virgin Birth of Jesus which for me is the unique God-given pattern of unconditional grace."<sup>72</sup> Preachers have long struggled to describe this interworking as well. Jim Shaddix, in his work *Decisional Preaching*, calls on expositors to create a space for hearers to respond to the preached work.<sup>73</sup> Yet, he too wrestles with the inability of hearers to respond to the Gospel without Christ's supernatural work on their hearts since they are incapable of choosing Christ on their own.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, he does not feel these two things need to be reconciled since Spurgeon did not either, who wrote:

I never reconcile two friends, never. These two doctrines are friends with one another; for they are both in God's Word, and I shall not attempt to reconcile them. If you show me that they are enemies, then I will reconcile them.<sup>75</sup>

For Torrance, rather than removing human agency, the substitutionary life and death of Christ actualizes human agency. He writes:

All through the incarnate life and activity of the Lord Jesus we are shown that 'all of grace' does not mean 'nothing of man', but precisely

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<sup>69</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 94.

<sup>70</sup> Kettler, "Torrance's View of Divine and Human Agency," 216.

<sup>71</sup> Colyer, *How to Read T.F. Torrance*, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, xii.

<sup>73</sup> Jim Shaddix, *Decisional Preaching* (Spring Hill: Rainer Publishing, 2019).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>75</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Jacob and Esau," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 5 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1859), 120.

the opposite: *all of grace means all of man*, for the fullness of grace creatively includes the fullness and completeness of our human response in the equation."<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, to dismiss logic in understanding divine and human agency is not to declare the relationship of the two as irrational.<sup>77</sup>

Logically 'all of grace' would mean 'nothing of man,' which may tempt people to apportion the role of Christ and of the believer by arguing for 'something of grace' and 'something of man,' something done *for me* by Christ and something I do *for myself*. *All of grace means all of man!*<sup>78</sup>

## 6. How to Preach the Vicarious Humanity of Christ

In light of the theological elements of Christ's vicarious humanity and faith, there remains the question of how one is to faithfully communicate this doctrine without doing so unevangelistically. A common element among Evangelical preaching is the presence of a call for response after the sermon. Torrance offers an example of what this call for response could look like:

God loves you so utterly and completely that he has given himself for you in Jesus Christ his beloved Son, and has thereby pledged his very Being as God for your salvation. In Jesus Christ God has actualized his unconditional love for you in your human nature in such a once for all way, that he cannot go back upon it without undoing the Incarnation and the Cross and thereby denying himself. Jesus Christ died for you precisely because you are sinful and utterly unworthy of him, and has thereby already made you his own before and apart from your ever believing in him. He has bound you to himself by his love in a way that he will never let you go, for even if you refuse him and damn yourself in hell his love will never cease. Therefore, repent and believe in Jesus

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<sup>76</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, xii.

<sup>77</sup> Colyer, *How to Read T.F. Torrance*, 120.

<sup>78</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, xii.

Christ as your Lord and Saviour. From beginning to end what Jesus Christ has done for you he has done not only as God but as man. He has acted in your place in the whole range of your human life and activity, including your personal decisions, and your responses to God's love, and even your acts of faith. He has believed for you, fulfilled your human response to God, even made your personal decision for you, so that he acknowledges you before God as one who has already responded to God in him, who has already believed in God through him, and whose personal decision is already implicated in Christ's self-offering to the Father, in all of which he has been fully and completely accepted by the Father, so that in Jesus Christ you are already accepted by him. Therefore, renounce yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.<sup>79</sup>

It was within the preaching of Billy Graham that Torrance found a model for the sort of Christocentric preaching he was seeking. Graham's preaching "directed people to Christ and to Christ alone as Lord and Savior, in such a direct and blunt way" so that they were "challenged by the gospel and turned in their utter helplessness to Christ Jesus, to find in him one who has wholly taken their place so that they might freely be given his place."<sup>80</sup>

Therefore, homileticians should consider how they offer the free gift of salvation so that their listeners are not thrown back onto their own decision, while at the same time still offering the opportunity for listeners to respond to the Gospel. In fact, Habets argues that calling for a decision was a key element of Torrance's own preaching.<sup>81</sup> Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix offer six pragmatic suggestions for

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>80</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 38.

<sup>81</sup> Myk Habets, "Theologia Is Eusebeia: Thomas F. Torrance's Church Homiletics," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, ed. Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 270.

facilitating a good call for response, which can offer a helpful grid for applying Torrance's vicarious humanity of Christ.<sup>82</sup>

### **Six Suggestions for Offering a Call for Response in Preaching**

First, the call is to be cohesive with one's sermon, because these calls can at times become overly routine or disjointed from the sermon's focus. Calls for response that do not flow naturally from the sermon's topic, such as calling for people to receive Christ for the first time after preaching on the Christian life, should be avoided.<sup>83</sup> Torrance modelled this by typically concluding with a summary application that fit with the expository thrust of his sermon.<sup>84</sup>

Second, Vines and Shaddix assert that the call should be simple and clear.<sup>85</sup> Habets notes that clarity of expression was one of the key themes of Torrance's preaching and that he would "not include any excessive technical theological vocabulary."<sup>86</sup> This restraint may come as a surprise due to his theological depth, but Torrance was keen on providing simplicity and clarity for his listeners, which was one of the things he appreciated about Graham's preaching as well.<sup>87</sup> Clarity is incredibly important for a call for response after preaching: "Your listeners should be told exactly what they're being asked to do, why they're being asked to do it, and what will take place when they do it."<sup>88</sup> Habets notes the following elements in Torrance's preaching:

The applicatory nature of the sermons is a striking feature: Torrance's directness in appealing to his congregants to repent, to believe, to offer worship, to give, to love, to enjoy God's creation, to act rightly, and all manner of other godly activities, but most of all, the invitation

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<sup>82</sup> Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons*, Rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2017), 383–385.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>84</sup> Habets, "Thomas F. Torrance's Church Homiletics," 267.

<sup>85</sup> Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 383.

<sup>86</sup> Habets, "Thomas F. Torrance's Church Homiletics," 268.

<sup>87</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 38.

<sup>88</sup> Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 383–84.

for every man, woman, and child to participate in the life of God in Jesus Christ by means of the Holy Spirit.<sup>89</sup>

Torrance's emphasis on application in his sermons show that his theological commitment to the vicarious humanity of Christ did not result in human passivity. There are still expectations and invitations for his people to obey and live in light of the text of Scripture.

As a part of the need for clarity in a call for response, Vines and Shaddix encourage preachers to "avoid giving the impression that 'walking an aisle' is synonymous with a commitment to Christ."<sup>90</sup> Torrance calls this "the modern notion of salvation by *existential decision*, in which we interpose ourselves, with our faith and our decision, in the place of Christ and His objective decision on our behalf."<sup>91</sup> Salvation by existential decision has been discussed extensively above, as well as its effect of equating assurance of salvation with the genuineness of one's decision for Christ. Instead, Torrance insists that the message of the New Testament is that

God loves us, that He has given His only Son to be our Saviour, that Christ has died for us when we were yet sinners, and that His work is finished, and *therefore* it calls for repentance and obedience of faith, but never does it say: This is what God in Christ has done for you, and you can be saved on condition that you repent and believe.<sup>92</sup>

Third, the call for response should be neither manipulative nor threatening. "Potential respondents should not be coerced, pressured, or made to feel guilty during the moment of decision."<sup>93</sup> In other words, the Gospel should be *good news* for the sinner, on account of Christ's finished work of salvation, so that they "do not

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<sup>89</sup> Habets, "Thomas F. Torrance's Church Homiletics," 270.

<sup>90</sup> Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 384.

<sup>91</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 58.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 384.

need to do anything to complete it but only to receive it gratefully.”<sup>94</sup> Jenny Richards’s distinction between covenantal and contractual love is helpful here:

A covenantal understanding is grounded in unconditional love and emphasizes the person and work of Christ; whereas a contractual, dualist understanding is grounded in legalistic, abstracted, performative actions of our own which try to condition God into loving us, or at best into continuing to accept us — an outworking of legal repentance.<sup>95</sup>

A legalistic, contractual understanding of love can lead to a response to the Gospel motivated by guilt rather than grace. Homiletician Bryan Chapell notes the following:

This proper expression of gratitude is not a warped sense of trying to repay God the eternal debt of our sin with more filthy rags from hands stained with Christ’s blood, but the sincere desire to demonstrate our love, thanksgiving, and appreciation for grace freely offered through the Lamb sacrificed once for all.<sup>96</sup>

For Chapell, it is only grace that can result in lasting change for people — never guilt. Therefore, rather than manipulating or threatening people to respond to the Gospel, the vicarious humanity of Christ encourages the listener to respond in joyful repentance and acceptance of Christ’s finished work.

Fourth, the call for response should be personal to every listener. “Each individual ought to feel like the speaker is talking specifically to him or her.”<sup>97</sup> Though Torrance believed that Christ died for all on account of his vicarious humanity, he also maintained that every individual had a responsibility to respond

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<sup>94</sup> Kettler, “Torrance’s View of Divine and Human Agency,” 213.

<sup>95</sup> Jenny Richards, “‘Seeking Love, Justice and Freedom for All:’ Using the Work of T.F. and J.B. Torrance to Address Domestic and Family Violence,” in *Thomas F. Torrance and Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis*, ed. Myk Habets and R. Lucas Stamps, *Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology* (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2023), 272.

<sup>96</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 302.

<sup>97</sup> Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 384.

to the Gospel. For example, in a published sermon on John 3:20, Torrance interpreted Jesus's words of standing at the door and knocking as addressed to the church; however, "they are also meant to be heard by the individual. Each of us may hear Jesus knocking on the door of his heart, and to each Jesus wants to say: 'My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.'"<sup>98</sup>

Fifth, the call of response includes an evangelistic invitation. "All Bible preaching issues forth into evangelism. Regardless of the specific Bible content of your message, your call for response should include an evangelistic appeal."<sup>99</sup> Though it's unclear whether Torrance would assert that every sermon *must* have an evangelistic thrust, he certainly was no stranger to offering an evangelistic appeal in his preaching.<sup>100</sup> In terms of communicating the vicarious humanity of Christ as a part of an evangelistic portion of a call for response, one could refer back to the example quoted at length at the beginning of this section.

The sixth and final quality of a good call for response that Vines and Shaddix note is that the call should have a functional plan. "When people respond, you should have a good plan in place to come alongside them."<sup>101</sup> Though Vines and Shaddix primarily have in view pragmatic elements like considering who could serve as counselors for those who come forward, Torrance also sees the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist as helpful elements for moving the believer's focus off of themselves and onto Christ's free gift of himself.<sup>102</sup>

So far as the proclamation of the Gospel is concerned the Sacraments tell us that even when we respond to its call for repentance and faith, it is nevertheless not on our repentance and faith that we must rely but solely on that which Christ has already done and continues to do,

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, "Christ in the Midst of His Church," in *When Christ Comes and Comes Again*, The Torrance Collection (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 30.

<sup>99</sup> Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 385.

<sup>100</sup> For an example of just a few see Torrance, "Christ in the Midst of His Church," 21, 30, 38, 44.

<sup>101</sup> Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 385.

<sup>102</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 96–97.

freely made available for us in and through the Sacraments.<sup>103</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Preaching the faith of Christ as a part of his vicarious humanity may seem difficult and perhaps foreign to many Evangelical preachers, but clearly articulated, it can begin to address the faulty conception of faith and assurance that is prevalent among those who conceived of their salvation as founded upon their own existential decision. Instead, it is Christ's decision on the believer's behalf that grounds their faith — his decision to assume fallen flesh and, in doing so, sanctify it through forming ontological, hypostatic union between God and humanity, and his decision to live a life vicariously as both representative and substitute for all humanity. Therefore, dualistic and deistic patterns of thought have been removed as humanity can now participate in Christ through relationship with him, no longer fearing that their salvation might be lost, for it was never theirs to earn to begin with, only receive as a gift in repentance and faith.

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<sup>103</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 159.